

The Student - Writer

A Little Talk Every Month with Those
Interested in the Technique of Literature.

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THE OPENING PUNCH

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TWO story manuscripts are dropped by the postman on an editor's desk. Placed together in the literary scales, they seemingly show equal merit so far as style, characterization, and atmosphere are concerned. Analyzed, they may be reducible to incidents of about equal dramatic appeal. The reader, dipping into incidents here and there in each, may find little to choose between them.

Yet the editor sends one manuscript back to the author, with "regrets," and keeps the other. "It has the punch," is his explanation.

Wherein does that punch lie? Granted that the rejected story is made up of well-handled incidents, good character-drawing, and workmanlike construction, what plus element has the story which was accepted?

It is safe to answer that this plus element is an out-of-the-ordinary feature.

It must be agreed that without one feature of distinction no literary production possesses strong appeal. The distinctive feature of a composition may lie in its style, subject-matter, arrangement of ideas, or something more subtle, as, the rhyming system of a set of verses; the plot, theme, or characterization of a novel; or the sincerity of an essay. To enumerate the ways in which distinction may be attained would be a formidable undertaking; but it is a truism that without one thing above the average the composition will be commonplace.

In fiction, it will be found that distinction in style, atmosphere, or characterization is to a great extent dependent upon innate gifts possessed by the writer. But the majority of present-day published stories owe their distinction not so much to these features as to their plots.

Distinction of plot is within the range of the majority of writers. While it may not overcome the handicap of poor style, weak charac-

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terization, or faulty technique, it usually will bring some acceptance to work that is mediocre in these respects. And it is the handiest ingredient for raising a story above the commonplace—for giving it punch.

There are two respects, and only two, so far as I know, in which a plot may have distinction. The punch may lie either in a striking and unusual opening situation or in a striking and unusual climax.

It might be more accurate to speak of the basic situation, or even the conception, instead of the opening situation; but for practical purposes these may be regarded as identical in meaning, and "opening situation" is least confusing in this connection.

Without going deeply into the relative merits of a distinctive climax and a distinctive opening situation, it may be admitted that each has its advantages. In all probability the story with a strong climax will go farther and live longer than one with an equally strong opening situation but weak in its climax. But the latter has the advantage of gaining more readers at the start, because it at once grips the imagination; just as the circus with the greatest outside display draws the biggest crowd the first day, although in the long run the entertainment that has the best acts inside will win out.

An example of a story in which the distinction consists in a striking basic or opening situation is the serial at present running through the *American Magazine*, Holworthy Hall's "The Man Nobody Knew."

From the start, this story tends to grip the reader's interest by presenting a strikingly unusual situation, made plausible by the author's deft handling. The hero of the tale returns to his old home town—from which he had departed under a cloud—and his appearance has been so altered by the skill of surgeons "over there" that he is able to pass under another name, unrecognized even by close acquaintances.

That situation, really, is the story. Any skillful writer of romances could make a thrilling serial out of the idea. For, once the basic situation has been conceived, the plot as a whole and the incidents involved in its development are largely matters of detail.

The charm of such story beginning lies in its appeal to the reader's imagination. The possibilities involved in the idea are felt instinctively—the complications and dramatic disclosures, the suspense and surprises which may grow out of it. A plot of this kind, based upon an unusual opening situation, should not, as a rule, develop too rapidly. As soon as the reader sees just what limits the author is going to impose upon himself, part of the zest disappears. For this reason, the story based upon a strong opening situation is best suited, generally speaking, to the leisurely development possible in a long story.

In Holworthy Hall's novel, the hero, now back home and masquerading under another name—practically a reincarnated soul, a personality in a new body—meets the sweetheart with whom he had quarreled before departing. The reader puts himself in the hero's place and feels the thrill of that unusual moment. It is thrilling to anyone responsive to this sort of narrative, and yet—coldly analyzed—in the scenes that take place between the hero and the girl there really is nothing which rises far above the plane of dullness. The thrill lies altogether in the circumstances under which the incidents occur.

Again, the hero meets men whom he had considered his enemies while he formerly lived in the city. Vicariously, the reader feels his satisfaction in successfully masquerading among them, knowing what a sensation would be caused by disclosure of his true identity.

These details, as worked out by the author, are just what might be expected. The meetings and conversations are of no particular interest in themselves—they merely become significant in view of the situation underlying them.

A writer failing to realize the principle back of such a story may weave a tale involving similar incidents and conversations, then attempt to compare his effort with that of the experienced author. Yet, even granting that his passages are handled with the same ease and power that mark those of the master, his story will very likely fall flat, simply because he has nothing back of those scenes to throw a glamour over all that takes place.

Take an analogy. A workman engaged on a skyscraper pauses on a slender beam suspended hundreds of feet above the street level, takes out his pipe, fills it, stands on one foot, strikes a match, and lights up. Then he walks on, puffing contentedly. Thousands watch the nervy exhibition and hold their breath in suspense.

Another workman stops in the middle of the street, stands on one foot, and also lights his pipe. Naturally, no attention is paid to him. It is not, then, the details of the act but the conditions under which it is performed that make it effective—that give it punch.

From which it is easy to see that, of two scenes equally well handled in different stories, one may be intensely thrilling, the other commonplace, simply because of the circumstances underlying. It would be well to recall here the principle mentioned in a former article on "The Precipice of Suspense." It is because the workman stands upon the brink of a man-made precipice that his action is so interesting. And that Holworthy Hall's hero stands upon the precipice of danger that his masquerade may be discovered is the reason why his commonplace conversations with the former sweetheart and business men are read with eagerness.

Another popular example in light fiction of a story based upon a striking situation was "Brewster's Millions," by George Barr McCutcheon, which appeared some years ago. In that yarn the situation confronting the hero was this: He had fallen heir to a fortune of seven million dollars which was to be his only upon condition that he should spend one million within a year.

The possibilities of this situation are fascinating. If we put ourselves in the hero's place we begin to realize that all sorts of difficulties lie in the way of spending legitimately so large a sum of money within twelve short months. We are dazzled by the mental picture of the rapid pace that must be led—of the meteoric swath to be cut by that million of dollars—of the race against time. Indeed, half of the work will be done by the imagination of the reader, leaping ahead to realize the possibilities of the idea as they are suggested.

The earlier quasi scientific romances of H. G. Wells—"The War of the Worlds," "The Food of the Gods," "The First Men in the Moon," and "The War in the Air," for example—were based upon this principle, carried to an extreme. Suppose it were possible for men to go to the moon—what would they find? This thought probably has flashed through the brain of every person at one time or another—and how it stimulates the imagination! Mr. Wells took advantage of the natural glamour surrounding the idea, made it a plausible hypothesis for his story, and thus prepared the way for a train of adventures in fictional form that could hardly fail to prove entertaining.

The novels of Jules Verne, based upon the same principle, owed their popularity to the fascinating question, "What if so-and-so were possible?" Jules Verne answered it by the suggestion, "Perhaps it is possible!" and immediately he was sure of an audience.

Of course, the ordinary scientific mind could work out possibilities along the line of moon habitation, but it requires a daring fiction-builder to conceive the whole thing as an actual experience and give it the breath of life. An ordinarily clever writer could weave incidents around a hero's efforts to dispose of a million dollars within a year; but it required the mind of an inventive storyteller to think of the situation in the first place.

These examples are given without intent to glorify light or popular fiction. The principle is not altogether limited to light novels and stories, although in such form it may more readily be studied. It is not difficult to discover novels of deep purpose, classic literary productions, which owe their appeal largely to the opening or basic situations they unfold to readers. At the same time, be it remembered, the chief difference between light and what might be termed deep fiction is that, in the former, the plot is a more important feature than in the latter. In a classic literary production,

the plot is secondary and the distinction may lie in the atmosphere, characterization, theme, or some more subtle phase. It is readily granted that a story may have distinction without possessing any plot features worth mentioning.

A drawback that may be noticed in many stories, in which the plot distinction is gained through an opening situation which seizes hold of the imagination, is that the climax is disappointing. In years to come, readers will recall a story about a man who set himself the task of spending a million dollars within a year, but they will fail to remember what happened to him. We recall in after years that H. G. Wells told an interesting story about some men who visited the moon, but what happened to them while there is but vaguely recalled, if at all.

The climax of the story, if it were the strongest feature, would be remembered even after the opening situation was forgotten. But rarely can there exist more than one outstanding feature of distinction in a single piece of work. In fact, it is the part of wisdom to let one feature—say, either the basic situation or the climax—over-top the other. Were they of equal importance, they would be in danger of weakening each other's effect.

But, naturally, there must be some degree of unusualness in the preliminary passages of any story, or else the striking climax will not succeed, because nobody ever will reach it. And no matter how imagination-compelling the opening situation may be, the climax should be big enough—should have sufficient punch—to prevent the story from seeming to fall flat. It should be greater in dramatic force than any other crisis that has been developed.

Be sure that your plot has one of these two things—an unusual situation which grips the reader at first and makes him want to read and see how the story comes out, or else a climax which catches him by surprise and causes him to forget the semiboredom with which he waded through the preliminary situations. —W. E. H.

THE ROASTED STEW

By CHAUNCEY THOMAS

I HAVE never yet been able to change a story to order of another, and I have never yet seen one successfully so changed. Vitally and in its broad conception, I mean; minor changes and reconstruction are not counted. Editors—I've done it myself—often suggest that the writer take his yarn and do this or that with it—make some vital change. What they really mean is: write another story. Do so. But do not chop up the other one. If you put a stew down before a man and he wants a roast, do you therefore proceed to roast the stew?

In a story, the roasted stew is worse than the first trial. Just send it off to another editor as it stands. Then, when you have worn them all out, put it away for awhile, and in a year or two you, on reading it, may be able to see the change needed yourself. Mark this well—no one but yourself can change a yarn in its fundamental features; nor should you attempt it at the suggestion of another. Another mind may cut out, but can never tell you what to put in. I may chop a yarn and leave blank spaces, but they are for the writer to fill. It must all come from within if it comes at all. Two minds together have never written anything really good. Where is the story, if they have? I want to read it.

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MARCH.	Mastering the Vocabulary. Versifying for Practice. The Story With a Purpose. The Dwindling News Story.
APRIL.	Outgrowing Criticism. Habits That Go in Pairs. Stories and Morals. Poetry and Rimery. Sad Endings.
MAY.	Mechanical Principles of Creative Writing. Dramatizing Fiction.
JUNE.	Web-Work Plot Structure. (Illustrated with diagrams.)
JULY.	Web-Work Plot Structure. (Continued.)
AUGUST.	The Free Training School for Writers. Web-Work Plot Structure. (Concluded.)
SEPTEMBER.	The Essay—Substance and Form. Write the First Page Last.
OCTOBER.	The Fickle Jade Inspiration.
NOVEMBER.	An Inspiration Symposium. (Including contributions from Arthur Preston Hankins, William MacLeod Raine, Hapsburg Liebe, Gertrude MacNulty Stevens and William Sanford.)
DECEMBER.	An Inspiration Symposium—Second Installment. (Including contributions from Robert Ames Bennet, Frederick J. Jackson, Junius B. Smith, Thane Miller Jones, Edwin Baird and Celia Baldwin Whitehead.)

1918 JANUARY.	An Inspiration Symposium—Third Installment. (Including contributions from J. Frank Davis, William Merriam Rouse, Harry Stephen Keeler and Kathlyn Leiser Robbins.)
FEBRUARY.	An Inspiration Symposium—Fourth Installment. (Including contributions from Kathrene and Robert Pinkerton, William H. Hamby, E. E. Harriman, William H. Kofoed, Chauncey Thomas and Alexander Hull.)
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